DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 198 695 FL 011 117

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TITLE The Folk Performance of Chicano and the Cultural Limits of Political Ideology.
INSTITUTION Southwest Educational Development Lab., Austin, Tex.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Jul 79
NOTE 32p.; In its Working Papers in Sociolinguistics, Number 62, p1-28, Jul 1979.
AVAILABLE FROM Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 211 East 7th Street, Austin, TX 78701.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Anthropology; Ethnography; *Folk Culture; Hispanic American Culture; Language Research; *Mexican Americans; *Political Attitudes; Pragmatics; Social Science Research; *Sociocultural Patterns; Sociolinguistics
IDENTIFIERS *Chicanos; *Ideology; Nicknames

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on problematic nature of the term "chicano" within the United States-Mexican community, and expecially in Texas. A revisionist thesis is discussed in two parts: (1) the conversion of this folk name into a public, ideologically expressive symbol in the 1960's did not achieve its intended purpose of political unification; and (2) in part this failure may be attributed to the unintentional viclation of a community's cultural rules for the socially appropriate use of the term, rules keyed on "chicano's" definition as folkloric performance in the generic areas of nicknaming and slurs. Literary, historical, and anecdotal evidence is elicited to support the claim that the term "chicano" affirms cultural identity and that it involves a cultural and not a manifestly political use of the term. The claim is made on the basis of field-work, anecdotal reports and dialogues, as well as surveys of attitudes toward self-referent terms among Mexican Americans that the folk performance of chicano appears to be governed by certain cultural rules of restriction. One conclusion is that those who would use folkloric aspects of culture should be attentive not only to textual accuracy, but also to such things as context, performance rules, and folk attitudes toward their own folklore. (Author/AMH)

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The Folk Performance of Chicano and The Cultural Limits of Political Ideology*

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Sociolinguistic Working Paper

NUMBER 62

July, 1979

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory

211 East Seventh Street

Austin, Texas

FL011117

When, at the initiative of a minority of the indigenous petite bourgeoisie, allied with the indigenous masses, the pre-independence movement is launched, the masses have no need to assert or reassert their identity, which they have never confused nor would have know how to confuse with that of the colonial power. This need is felt only by the indigenous petite bourgeoisie which finds itself obliged to take up a position in the struggle which opposes the masses to the colonial power (Cabral 1973).

THE FOLK PERFORMANCE OF CHICANO AND THE CULTURAL LIMITS OF POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

Jose E. Limon

This paper is intended as a contribution to the scholarly study of Mexican culture in the United States, specifically the cultural process of group naming. It focuses on the problematic nature of the term chicano within the U.S.-Mexican community, especially in Texas, and argues for a revisionist thesis in two parts. First, the conversion of this folk name into a public, ideologically expressive symbol in the 1960s did not achieve its intended purpose of political unification; second, in part this failure may be attributed to the unintentional violation of a community's cultural rules for the socially appropriate use of the term--rules keyed on chicano's definition as folkloric performance in the generic areas of nicknaming and slurs. As an anthropological folklorist, my primary intention is to lend greater clarity to the term's folk status; however, I will also fashion a critical consideration of the relationship between mass cultural forms such as folklore and social movements led by political elites.

The Contemporary Political Origins of Chicano

Scholarly studies of the Mexican people in the United States often take the reader through a preliminary, sometimes lengthy, historical review, at times starting with the origins of man, more often with a later date such as 1848. I shall not indulge. As we prepare to enter the 1980s, I will trust to a broader historical knowledge amongst the readers of these pages, or if such is not present, I refer them to recent historical scholarship (Gómez-Q. and Arroyo 1976). Instead, I shall focus on the significant sociopolitical events from 1966 to the present, for it is in this contemporary context that chicano emerges as a politically expressive symbol.

Among such significant events we may count (1) the continuing socio-economic subordination of Mexicans in the U.S. into the 1960s, (2) the responsive resurgence of a limited but influential trade unionsim such as that of César Chávez and the United Farm Workers, (3) the emergence of an activist social movement of Mexican descent students primarily in colleges and universitites, (4) the institutionalization of the latter into off-campus political efforts in a variety of groupings and ideologies, and finally

(5) the identification of Mexican immigration as the key issue of the late 1970s and the future. The last three events are of particular concern for this essay, always against the backdrop of the other two.

Certainly the specific contemporary sociopolitical conversion of chicano lies in the student movement that eventually identified itself with this name and urged its acceptance. While the student movement appeared on college campuses across the country including such unlikely places as Harvard and Yale, its greatest strength and sharpest articulation occurred in the Southwest. Much of what I have to say applies to this nationwide phenomenon, but my remarks in this section are based principally on personal participation in the student movement at the University of Texas at Austin from 1966 to 1975 combined later in this period with ethnographic observation of it and its expressive culture (Limón 1978a).

The student movement on the University of Texas campus was made up largely of lower middle and middle class students from the traditionally Mexican areas of southern Texas. They came to the campus in increasing numbers in the 1960s, largely as a result of unprecedented financial aid in the post-Sputnik era and to some extent as a result of University publicity efforts in south Texas. Like so many other major campuses in the 1960s, the University of Texas at Austin was the scene of an intense ideological formulation and political activism, most of it leftist and critical of the United States for its international policies, particularly in Southeast Asia, and for its domestic attitudes toward minorities. Together with this activism on the left, the campus also experienced the politically nationalist presence of the black civil rights student movement. As relatively well educated members of an exploited proletariat, some of the students of Mexican descent were particularly and intensely stimulated by this developing activist context, even while their historically developed sense of strong ethnic boundaries did not permit close participation or co-operation with Anglo-American dominated movements. This would include the black student movement, although there were closer ties to the latter.

This sense of group identity became even more pronounced in 1965-67 with the appearance of the largely Mexican, United Farmworker's labor movement, most concretely in the form of agricultural strikes in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas. As a supporting move for these strikes, union organizers led a march to Austin, the state capital, to petition the

governor and legislature for a redress of their economic grievances. In their march to Austin, the farmworkers also served to remind Texas-Mexican University students of their social origins and obligations. During the fall of 1966, many such students became actively involved in campus support committees on behalf of their kindsmen from south Texas. This initial support effort finally produced a formal association in the spring of 1967. Initially known as the Mexican American Student Organization (MASO), it later changed its name to the Mexican American Youth Organization (MAYO) in a show of solidarity with other very similar college and secondary school groups appearing across Texas most notably at St. Mary's University in San Antonio and Texas A & I University in Kingsville.

By 1969-1970, MAYO had defined itself as a campus activist group dedicated to political and cultural work on behalf of the Texas-Mexican community across a broad range of issues. Such work included activity on behalf of Mexican Democratic candidates for political office in Austin, agitation for ethnic studies courses in the University curriculum, statewide coordination with other MAYO chapters on school walkouts and of course, continuing support of the farmworkers. Into the 1970s, MAYO, in support of a statewide effort, participated in the formation of the off-campus, quasi separationist and ostensibly radical group known as La Raza Unida Party. This political party was offered primarily to the Texas-Mexican people, as a third party electoral alternative to Democrats and Republicans. In addition to these political efforts, the student movement also promoted an interest in the identification and revival of what was called "chicano culture" principally through student art, music, literature, drama and festival.

The students had an effect on culture in a less conscious yet ultimately more socially significant manner. While keeping the name Mexican American Youth Organization, they nevertheless began increasingly to use the term chicano as a public label and as a political symbol. Certainly by the early 1970s, the term became widely used within the student sector as a name for their movement and as their name for the larger population of Mexican descent in the United States. Students spoke of "the Chicano movement" and movement speeches, tracts, and other forms of public discourse often contained statements like "Chicanos are an exploited people..." and "the chicano community believes that..." Yet even as the term came to be used as a public ethnic group label by students, it also took on additional

meanings for them. While it referred to the larger community, it also became an ideological term for individuals promoting an intense ethnic nationalism leading to a vaguely defined political and cultural liberation of the community. Thus, in making a speech or writing a tract, one could use the term to refer to all persons of Mexican descent in the United States, or one could contextually specify it to identify an ethnic nationalist individual or position in contra-distinction to others allegedly favoring a policy of accomodation and assimilation to United States culture and society. However, as activists seeking the political unity of all U.S. Mexicans, the student movement hoped for the genral acceptance of this term and its ideological content by all members of the population. From my Texas experience, I agree with Villanueva's larger national assessment of the ideological significance and the ultimate ideal intention of chicano. "As I see it, chicano, as it emerged in the 1960s, is an ideological term of solidarity which ideally invovles all Northamericans of Mexican descent..." (1978: 390).

But why was this name selected for these purposes? Why not another from the myriad of possibilities? The selection appears to have been motivated by a number of considerations: the student movement needed a name that would not compromise its strong sense of ethnic nationalism and its strident and anti-Anglo-American stance, hence the rejection of all names containing "American" such as "Mexican-American"; on the other hand, as ethnic nationalists, the students needed a name that spoke directly to the allegedly peculiar sociocultural character of Mexicans north of the Rio Grande and would not confuse them with those in Mexico. This particular distinction received added emphasis from the student allegation that Mexican nationals saw Mexicans on this side of the river as cultural traitors- as pochos. The result was the implicit rejection of terms such as "Mexican" or mexicano. Finally, from the student perspective, an appropriate name would clearly have its origins within the community, especially within its more proletarian class, such as the farmworkers. As such, the name would serve as a linking symbol between a socially marginal student sector and the ultimate social beneficiary of the latter's political, educational and cultural efforts.

While it is not clear who first suggested the term chicano or when, it is clear that by the late 1960s, the term had gained widespread

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popularity among students and other non-student activists as a general term and as a political-cultural symbol. However, if the political unity of the Mexican people in Texas and the rest of the United States was the ultimate ideal for the student movement, they did not aid their cause by selecting this term.

Chicano: The Rejection of a Symbol

Almost immediately after its public appearance within the student movement, the term set off controversy and debate within the larger Mexican community in the U.S. Generally, the community reaction to the term ranged from indifference to outright rejection and hostility. Initially, the student movement treated this negative with disdain labeling it as the reactionary expression of a few members of the middle and upper classes who were assimilationist and politically right of center. And, to be sure, some such individuals did vociferously reject the term precisely because of its association with militant cultural nationalism. Clearly however, the mass of the Mexican people in Texas do not belong in an assimilationist rightist category and yet there is growing and compelling evidence of chicano's rejection by this mass population as well as the general U.S.-Mexican community.

Perhaps the most telling evidence of this rejection is to be found in a random survey of Spanish surnamed individuals conducted by Nicholas Valenzuela in 1972 in cooperation with the Center for Communications Research at the University of Texas at Austin (1973). According to this study, only 6% of the 1500 persons sampled prefer the term chicano as a self referent. This evidence is particularly significant since the sample was taken in Austin and San Antonio, Texas. As sites of important Chicano student activist movements, one might expect the 6% total to include some students and one might also expect the Mexican public's acceptance of the term to be greater in these areas as a result of constant student propaganda. Of equal significance is the most popular selection in this sample. Some 43% chose mexicano.

Another survey of 158 Spanish surnamed persons throughout the Southwest also reveals a generally low preference for chicano and a decided lack of popularity for the term in Texas (Nostrand 1973). Of the sixty-one (61) persons surveyed in Texas in terms of their choice of labels of self reference in English, only four chose chicano. To be sure the inclusion of chicano in a choice of terms in English is puzzling, as is the survey's obvious bias toward the middle and upper socioeconomic classes and/or informants referred

to the investigator by managers of Chambers of Commerce. Like Nostrand, Teske and Nelson sampled the middle class in several Texas cities (McAllen, Austin, Waco and Lubbock). They also detect a low preference for chicano (1973).

It might be argued that this rejection of the term is coming primarily from the middle class and at least some of the evidence I have cited thus far would support that assertion. Yet it is also equally clear that the term is meeting with widespread rejection within the more working class sectors of the community. I can report on interview work carried out by some of my students at the University of Texas at San Antonio during the period 1975-1978. Some twenty-five undergraduate students of Mexican descent were asked to obtain cultural data on six informants each from the San Antonio area They sere also asked to select working class informants of Mexican descent using income and occupational criteria. Most of the latter could be easily classified as unskilled or semi-skilled labor (janitors, truck drivers, laundry workers or housewives with spouses in such occupations). The interviews were carried out in informal,Spanish language dominant conversations. One question is of concern here. "¿Cómo prefiere que le llamen a usted en términos de su cultura?" (What do you prefer to be called in terms of your culture?), followed by the choices Latino, méxico-amercano, chicano, mexicano, hispano, as well as Mexican-American, Mexican, Latin American, Spanish and American of Mexican descent. All of these names were typed on a large index card and handed to each informant for his perusal. Some 65% of the informants selected mexicano and approximately 15% opted for méxico-americano. The remaining 20% were divided among the rest, with only three "write-in" votes for "American". Only 4% selected chicano (Límon 1978). To this evidence might be added the older findings of Grebler et al indicating a high majority preference for Mexican and mexicano among low income respondents in Los Angele and San Antonio, although admittedly in 1965-66 the research team did not include chicano in their choices (1970). Nevertheless, it would seem difficul to assert confidently that its inclusion would have made a substantial differ- ence. More recently, in a survey conducted in a low income Colorado urban barrio, Rivera et al find a 41% prefernece for Mexican or Mexican-American an a 19% rating for chicano (1978).

Recent ethnographic work in the Texas-Mexican community also attests to the relative unpopilarity of the term within the working class. In a very

recent monograph on Mexican-Americans in Dallas, Shirley Archor reports:

> Certain members of the population, particularly those who are actively engaged in movements for sociopolitical change, emphatically and proudly assert' ¡Yo soy chicano! (I am chicano!) However, many barrio residents dislike this word, some saying it applies only to political activists, and others commenting that it doesn't sound 'nice.' In ordinary conversation, most barrio members speak of themselves as mejicanos or use its English equivalent 'Mexicans' (1978:2).

We should clearly note that it is barrio residents and not middle and upper class assimilationists who "dislike this word" and who also prefer to be called mejicanos or Mexicans. Her findings support Foley et al in their ethnography of a poor rural south Texas town:

> The term Mexicano was generally used instead of Mexican-American or Chicano because that was how most brown North Towners referred to themselves (1978: xii).

We should note Arthur Rubel's differing ethnographic report that among poor south Texas-Mexicans, chicano and mexicano are more or less interchangeable (1966). The bulk of the evidence presented thus far would seriously bring this assertion into question, particularly in the light of Américo Paredes' recent devastating criticism of Rubel's failure to fully understand the expressive dimensions of the Spanish language in south Texas (1977).

To be sure there is at least some evidence of a relatively greater popularity of chicano among younger members of the population, although these findings are either questionable, inconclusive or not particularly overwhelming. Gutierrez and Hirsch (1973) find Crystal City, Texas teenagers splitting almost evenly in their choices of either chicano (49%) or Mexican-American (47%). The unique political climate of this community needs to be taken into account in interpreting these results; apart from this consideration, one must also question the limited choice of only these two names offered to the respondents. On the other hand, when posing the open ended question "The name or label you like most for your group?" Miller (1976) finds a 25% preference for chicano among high school sophomores in rural southwest Texas and strangely enough an almost non-existent preference for mexicano in communities not fifty miles from the Foley field site in south Texas. In the same vein Metzgar finds younger people in New Mexico preferring chicano by a percentage as high as 38%, although the majority prefer Spanigh-American, Hispano or Mexican (1974). This particular data has to be considered in a special light because of the peculiar denial of things Mexican in New Mexico and the apparently still continuing romance with the Spanish past. Further, Metzgar did not offer his respondents the choice

mexicano, although I'm not sure that this would have made a difference in this particular culture area. A more interesting finding with respect to youth is Stoddard's assessment of an El Paso, Texas barrio (1970). Here the youth prefer chicano by some 19% but only when addressed by the in-group. Only 8% preferred that Anglos refer to them with this term demonstrating on the one hand the relative unpopularity of the term as a form of public address and its even greater unpopularity when it is used outside of the group--a point that I will emphasize later.

While things may change in the future, at this moment it would appear that chicano is a relatively unpopular term of self-reference within the larger Mexican community in the United States and it would seem, especially so in Texas. Or to be more precise, it is a relatively unpopular term of public self-reference. That is, those surveyed were implicitly asked to select a name they would prefer as an official, institutionally transmitted self-reference; the very use of survey techniques sets up this context for selection. Even participant observation techniques as practiced by some non-native anthropologists may create this kind of context in which the informants select and perform according to their definition of a situation including the presence of an official, non-native investigator. Performing for the interviewer, as Lee Haring might agree, may also imply non-performance as well (1972). By now the reader might suspect he is being led toward a redefinition of chicano's cultural status which allows for a greater community use of chicano in a private, that is, in an in-group context, as opposed to the public mode, and, of course, he will be right.

The Folkloric Status of Chicano

This redefinition would view chicano as folklore and it is precisely its status as such that creates part of the disonance with the conversion efforts of the Chicano movement. Chicano is folklore in at least two sorts of textually generic modes. While acknowledging their initial vagueness, I shall construe these modes as broadly negative and positive. As a negative most we can consider chicano's use as a traditional ethnic slur, or to be more precise an ethnic-class slur. Almost without exception, the scholarship on the name defines it as a derogatory term referring to lower socio-economic, recent immigrants from Mexico (Gámio 1930). The often implicit corollary to this notion is that the term is used as such by the middle and upper U.S. native born classes of Mexican descent. Presumably it is the

latter, who in their own in-group settings, perform the slur with reference to others, or perhpas they even employ it directly across group boundaries in the manner of a taunt. We are not really sure of this kind of performance, because no study I know ethnographically reports such a use of chicano. Nevertheless, I agree to a point, and I cite at least one working class informant's report taken from my own field work in San Antonio, Texas.

> Si hombre, estos pinches chicanos vienen, no pagan taxas, y se quedan con los trabajos. (Yeah, man, these damn chicanos come, they don't pay taxes, and they get the jobs.)

Or, we can turn to an historical textual example of a similar use of the term in 1911. The following report appeared in La Cronica, a Spanish language newspaper published in Laredo, Texas. I translate:

> We have received word from Houston that a tamale business established by chicanos sells it tamales in the street yelling 'Red Hot Tamales! Red, White, and Green, the Mexican flag in!' If this is true, those disgraceful people are an embarrassment to any flag, and the Mexican people in Houston should take steps to protest...this low behavior. Because of the ignorance of such men, our people are held in low esteem and not appreciated in Texas (1911a: 3).

The quotation is of double interest. First, it clearly associates chicano with lower class people, not necessarily economically, but as we would say in Spanish, with "gente inculta" (people without manners). Secondly, it makes no distinction between Mexicans in Houston and presumably Mexicans everywhere who should be equally proud of their flag. It is the ill-mannered, unpatriotic behavior of some that earns them the slur chicano.

Certainly chicano has a folkloric use as a negative intra-ethnic, class slur, perhaps similar in tone, performance context and social objective to terms such as "redneck," and "white trash." Yet, if I may continue with comparative Southern examples, it is at least somewhat similar to the term "nigger," and in making use of this comparison I argue for chicano's positive folkloric mode.

Like "nigger" in all black in-group scenes, chicano may be employed as a term expressing closeness and group solidarity, when it is performed within the group. As such, I view chicano as a kind of group nickname--as still another example of a Mexican-Latino tendency to engage in systematic, extensive nichnaming, including the use of animal names, the naming of physical deformities, or naming a person after a special event in his life (Foster 1964).

Chicano is produced by still another sociolinguistic nicknaming process. In a fine linguistic study, Tino Villanueva notes an often cited interpretation of the term's historical origins. According to this interpretation, pre-Conquest Indians in Mexico referred to themselves as Meshicas. Upon their arrival the Spanish would hear this term but would render the sh as X according to their own pronounciation and orthographic systems. Nevertheless, supposedly the Indians would continue to say Meshicas, later Meshicanos and supposedly still later shicanos, with the latter becoming the modern chicano. As Villanueva notes, this interpretation is widely favored within the Chicano movement, especially with those who would emphasize the Indian element in their culture.

Nevertheless, while acknowledging its plausibility as an explanation for chicano, he seems to opt for another non-historical and much more probable source for the term. By this interpretation, chicano is a linguistic product of a phase in child language development coupled with an adult exptessive nameing practice. That is, because of his still imprefect pronounciation, the Spanish speaking child will often pronounce certain consonants such as g, j, k, s, and x as č (ch). The result is a child language with words like cocha for cosa (thing) or phrases like ¿qué pachó? for ¿qué pasé? (what happened?). The Spanish speaking child may also drop syllables, while he is making these ch sounds producing for example, the name Cheno for the formal Eugenio (1978).

While we can be somewhat certain that a child did not produce the word chicano, somewhere an adult probably did by using this child language as an expressive folkloric resource--an intensifying practice common among adult Mexicans and other Latin American populations. Two close friends may meet after a long separation and one may greet the other with a lilt in the voice and a ¿Qué pachó? instead of a formal ¿Qué pasó? (What's going on?) Or, in a better known example, the city of El Paso is often affectionately referred to as El Pacho or El Pachuco. More to the point of this essay, adults themselves may develop or at least maintain personal nicknames derived from this child language resource. The aforementioned Cheno is one example as are Cheli (Araceli), Wicho (Mauricio), Tencha (Hortensia), and Choco (Socorro). In each case, a shortening and a ch addition produces a nickname for a person. In actual performance, such an adult expressive exploitation of a child language resource is usually done with an attitude of affection and intimacy. The performance affirms and signals close bonds of kindship or friendship.

It is my contention that chicano is a very similar kind of nickname, albeit a group nickname, produced by this two fold language practice from the formal name, mexicano. That is, in addition to its aforementioned uses as a class slur, chicano may also have the affectively positive dimensions of a traditional nicknaming practice.

Something of this usage is captured in 1947 in a short literary sketch by a U.S. Mexican writer. Mario Suarez identified the inhabitants of the Mexican section of Tuscon, Arizona as

> ...Chicanos who raise hell on Saturday night... While the term chicano is the short way of saying Mexicano, it is the long way of referring to everybody...the assortment of harlequins, bandits, oppressors, oppressed, gentlemen and bums who came from Old Mexico to work on the Southern Pacific, pick cotton, clerk, labor, sing, and go on relief (1947: 96).

The quotation also conveys another important characteristic of the term. As a nickname, it is used to identify all of those "who came from Old Mexico," although not with a derogatory attitude. As a nickname, chicano seems to emphasize nationality--a use more evident in an anecdote which appeared in the context of an article entitled "Vicios de la Raza" (Vices of the People). Appearing in a 1911 Spanish language newspaper, the article attacks those Texas-Mexicans who disassociate themselves from their native culture and try to emulate Anglo-American customs and values (Limón 1977). As a satirical introduction to the central anecdote, the author tells of one man who cancelled his subscription to the newspaper when he left south Texas--he didn't want his Anglo friends to know he subscribed to Mexican newspapers. We also learn of some Texas-Mexicans who are asked by their Anglo bosses if they are Mexican and reply, "No, mi Apaniard!" Then there is a local Mexican fellow--a "dark man"--who always begins to speak English and smoke big cigars whenever he gets drunk (1911: 3). Finally, the author narrates the following joking anecdote:

> We know a tamalera who got married in the interior of Texas with a mister and since she was a bit ignorant she was not received in Anglo society and had to associate with her own people. One day she was invited to a big tamalada--as a birthday party for a chicano, and when presented with her plate of tamales, she asked, Que este?' 'Tamales,' they answered. Can you imagine their surprise when they saw this Americanized lady eating her tamales husks and all! (J1732 Ignorance of certain foods.)

While the entire jest is a folklore item, I am principally concerned with the use of the name chicano in the anecdotal conversational context between the writer and his audience. The author develops a character who

has betrayed her culture in a number of ways. In addition to leaving the heavily Mexican Border area, she married a mister--an Anglo-American--and she pretends not to know Spanish when she says, "¿Qué este?" instead of the correct "¿Qué es?" or "¿Qué es ésto?" (What is this?). Her ultimate betrayal is, of course, her feigned ignorance of a key food item--tam les--especially since she was a tamalera. She appears as an absurd comical figure in her insistence on eating the tamales with husks. Dramatically opposed to her is a group that does value these cultural practices, and it is coalesced around the birthday honoree who is identified as a chicano. The term is closely associated with cultural conservation, and, as far as I know, this is the earliest known use of chicano.

This rhetorical use of the name to emphasize cultural nationality is also evident in the three following verbal interactions given as examples of what I have observed to be a widespread practice. The first is a secondary report related to me by Professor Americo Paredes and the other two are based on field observations. According to Professor Paredes, in 1925 one of his relatives, a very culturally conservative Texas-Mexican male, was visiting with his five year old niece and her parents. They had dressed her in a Texas cowgirl outfit which prompted her uncle to say "Where did this gringa come from?" Probably scared by the loud tone of his voice, the little girl began to cry and to pacify her and possibly the parents, the uncle quickly said, "No, no, she is not a gringa, she is a chicanita!" To correct his own inadvertant cultural error in loosely labeling her a gringa (even if only in a joking way) the uncle turns to an expressive resource--chicano--to correct and balance the error by emphasizing the little girls' mexicanidad. Apparently it would not do to simply say "she is a "mexicana!" In this informal in-group context chicanita emphasizes her cultural identity.

Such a folk use of the name to offset cultural stress is not confined to history. While doing field work on another project in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas in 1972, I had the following exchange with an elderly, lower socio-economic Texas-Mexican informant:

Investigator: ¿Y cómo se llamaba su amigo? (and what was your friend's name?)

Informant: Roberto... Roberto Davis...

Investigator: ¿Es mexicano él? (Is he Mexican?)

Informant: ¡Si hombre!...es chicano. (yes, of course,... he is chicano...)

In the heavily Mexican Lower Rio Grande Valley, we often find descendants of marriages between early Anglo-American settlers and Mexican women. These individuals, such as Roberto Davis, have non-Hispanic surnames yet are thoroughly border-Mexican in their cultural behavior. My questioning response to his name was taken as an expression of doubt concerning his cultural identity and my informant's somewhat emotional reaction and his use of chicano appeared to be a way of affirming his friend's identity and, by implication, his own. His reaction was particularly intriguing considering his clearly expressed negative views towards the Chicano movement.

Finally, I relate the following interaction collected in a Mexican working class bar in San Antonio, Texas in 1977. The bar is atypical in some respects principally because it is located near a very affluent Anglo-American section of the city, and while catering almost exlusively to Mexican working men from a nearby cement plant, occasionally a few Anglo workers also show up. I was questioning one fifty year old Mexican informant about the presence of the Anglos; he put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Sí, sí vienen aquí... pero no te preocupes... este lugar es chicano." (Yes, yes they come in here,...but don't worry, this place is chicano.)

Again, an ambivalence in the cultural definition of a scene seemed to bring forth an expressive affirmation using chicano as a rhetorical resource. Surprised by his use of the term, I questioned him further producing this crucial exchange:

Investigator: Dígame, ¿porqué usó la palabra chicano ahorita? (Tell me, why did you use the term chicano just now?)

Informant: (Surprised and with some hesitation) Pos...no se...tu sabes...pa' que supieras que este lugar si es mexicano... como que chicano lo hace mas raza... (Well...I don't know...you know... so that you would know that this place is really Mexican like chicano makes it more raza.)

Investigator: ¿Quiere decir usted que... (You mean to say...)

Informant: (Interrupts) Pero no chicano como dicen esos de ese partido de la raza. (But, not chicano as it is said by those from the party of la raza.)

Investigator: ¿Cómo dice? (How do you mean?)

Informant: Tu sabes...no es cosa de politica y de andar haciendo speeches usando la palabra,...yo nomas la uso cada cuando como la usé ahorita. (You know...it's not a political thing and for going around making speeches with the word... I just use it once in a while like I used it just now.)

This interaction has a number of interesting points. It is clear that chicano is part of the informant's expressive verbal repertoire and that he uses it on certain occasions. As in the printed anecdotes and in the other verbal interactions, this bit of folklore seems to emerge during stress producing situations and it affirms cultural identity. Further, this particular interaction involves a cultural and not a manifestly political use of the term, apparently referring to the Raza Unida Party (see p.); the informant insists on the distinction.

The Socio-Cultural Significance of Chicano

Whether as slur or nickname, chicano is folklore with a sociopsychological significance Duckert gives us this sort of broad insight when he tells us that nicknames (and one would think slurs)

> ...cannot exist in or arise from a vacuum. They are by nature social; they must be shared to endure, and their origin is often communal. Sometimes it is a community of enthusiasm...some nicknames originate or are widely used in a community of frustration or despair whether real or fancied (1973: 155).

In recent years a greater disciplinary precision has been introduced into the study of folklore as a social phenomenon with the appearance of new perspectives conceptualizing folklore as a set of communicative social art forms best understood in the context of performance in small groups. One theorist in this new orientation has argued for a rhetorical thoery of folklore. For Abrahams, folklore permits social groups to deal with recurren anxieties caused by internal and external threatening forces. As a set of traditional expressive items, folklore is continually available to the competent folk performer who utilizes these highly symbolic forms before a group to mirror, objectify, and in a psychological sense, control the problems besetting the group . Utilizing the formal aesthetic and the cognitive features of a ballad or a tale, the performer has the power to move and persuade his audience toward a unified point of view relative to its problems (1972).

Some of the minor genres such as prayers, spells, charms, taunts, nicknames and slurs are also utilized by performers to reflect and comment upon problems in an aesthetically engaging manner. Others seem to work much more literally, although they too have a rhetorical function (Abrahams 1968). Some curses and taunts, for example, work through the sheer application of culturally or socially charged artistic language to a social problem. One possibel rhetorical result is a reduction in the social level of the problem

The well know Texas-Mexican children's taunt "Rinche pinche, cara de chinche!" (Mean Ranger, face of a bug!) is used by these children, not against the Texas Rangers, but against other children. Through such structured artistic language the folk performer transfers the social opprobrium attached to the Texas Rangers to adversary children reducing them in the eyes of the audience; in the case of very young children they may be merely transferring the negative connotations of "-inche" sounds in Mexican culture. Taunts such as these, as well as curses, bring a negative control to bear on social problems through the power of metaphorical language. Problems may also be dealt with by evoking stronger positive forces to counter them. In Mexican culture as well as many others, potential threats and obstacles to future goals and ambitions are psychologically managed by evoking the support of super-natural beings as in the common "Si Dios quiere" (if God wills it).

In a similar manner nicknames and slurs may be used to bring culturally charged language to bear on social problems either by objectivying them and rendering them psychologically harmless or by countering them directly through the sheer power of culturally valued names (Jackson 1967). At the simplest level, such names may serve to personalize an otherwise impersonal threatening environment as in President Ford insisting on being called Jerry even after his ascension to the Presidency. Nicknames have traditionally permitted groups to psychologically handle the special physical characteristics of other human beings which provoke anxiety. We are all too familiar with "Fats," "Shorty" and "Slim," and within the Mexican community we detect a seemingly greater propensity to deal with physical deformities by naming them. Thus we find el chueco (the bent one) for someone with a spinal defect or la ardilla (the squirrel) for someone with protruding teeth. Social roles and statuses may also be foregrounded and controlled in this manner. In the context of foregrounded and controlled in this manner. In the contest of pervasive educational failure and rare success, a particularly scholarly boy from one of the Mexican barrios in the Southwest will often be tagged el profe (the professor).

Three sorts of nicknames are shared by groups but are generally applied to individuals. Social groups can also have nicknames for themselves and these may refer to any of several social categories including ethnicity, occupation, religion, or region. Sometimes these group nicknames may originate within the group (gyrene for the Marine Corps, or brother for black

people) and very often such names are really single word ethnic slurs borrowed from other groups but inverted in their tone, meaning, and contextual use. Names such as "nigger" and "Meskin" are used exclusively within the ethnic group in question, serve their respective reference groups by foregrounding and psychologically checking the presence of racism in the environment. By using otherwise racist slurs in an interpersonal, sympathetic, and somewhat humorous manner, these groups acknowledge and invert the racist thrust of such slurs, converting them into nicknames for establishing greater group solidarity.

Chicano represents a more interesting and complicated case, for as I have suggested it is both an intra-ethnic class based slur and a nickname. That class is the major determinant of its definition as a slur seems to be without question. While several commentators have noted its application to recent immigrants from Mexico, it is usually poor immigrants that they are referring to, and over the years, the term has been applied to all poor Mexicans in the U.S. regardless of their date of arrival. I have provided one textual and one contextual example of such a slur usage. When U.S. Mexican individuals use the term in this manner, they are also managing a problem in the social environment. Possible it may be the problem posed by cheap labor competition in a stagnant capitalist economy or perhaps they are at the same time expressing resentment at those who may remind them of their own lower socioeconomic origins. In any case, it is clear that such a negative attitude can be vented through the pejorative articulation of chicano as a caustic slur.

Yet, at the same time, its very association with the lower socioeconomic classes may be responsible for tis potential use as a positive nickname in other contexts. In a complex society where acculturation is so closely correlated with class mobility, it is recent immigrant and the still poor U.S.-born Mexican who are most likely to conserve values and practices defining a mexicanidad in the U.S. In the previously described scenes, those who employ chicano as an affirmative nickname seem to be exploiting this social resource of culture and bringing its rhetorical value to bear on culturally ambivalent situations. Chicano is the agent for the transference of symbolic power.

For the larger folk group, chicano can be a name for a political movement and ideology, a class slur, or an affirmative nickname. What it is in

any one instance depends centrally on the context of performance. The available evidence would indicate that there is not much use of the political term among the Mexican masses in the U.S. except when they are discusisng the term rather than using it, and more often than not, doing so with attitudes of contempt and rejection. The other two constitute actual conversational uses of the term; they are also older and much more widespread, and as I have been suggesting, they are folklore with a rhetorical significance.

Yet, if one folk rhetorical use of chicano is the affirmation of cultural identity, why would such a usage not be consonant with its use in the Chicano movement, that is, as a symbol of strong cultural nationalist identity? Why would the general populace reject this obstensibly similar usage? One partial answer may be quite simply that the Chicano movement has added political meanings to the term which do not meet with the approval of the larger community. Such a view would construe this community as being essentially politically conservative; in rejecting chicano, they are rejecting a seemingly "radical" politics. I think not. If anything is being rejected, it may be a 1960s counter cultural political style involving inflated rhetoric, dress and other personal habits, adventurist confrontation tactics, etc. While acknowledging the possibility of an essentially conservative Mexican society in the U.S., frankly the history and contemporary life of this community testify to a remarkable willingness to engage in mass militant struggles on its behalf when presented with politically and culturally meaningful alternatives (Limón 1974; Nelson-Cisneros 1975; Zamora 1975). I would maintain that another and possibly more important source of disharmony may lie, not in differing policical attitudes, but rather in the disparate ways of performing chicano in the activist and the non-university sectors of the total community. I have already spoken of the latter as "folkloric" in nature; I would now point to the restricted social character of folklore.

The Folk Performance of Chicano

Some time ago Alan Dundes urged folklorists to pay more attention to the context in which folklore occurs pointing out how a specific social setting may determine both the form and the function of folklore (1964). The current and more focused concern with performance-in-context is likely a result of his early advice, although contemporary theorists would take us to another aspect of context, namely the limiting nature of a social group for folkloric performance.

With some exceptions, it would appear that folklore is largely an in-group phenomenon. Whether defined in terms of ethnicity, age, occupation, or other sociological criteria, a group--or more precisely, its specialized performer--perform their myths, songs, speech and other folklore for those who share their identity. Of course, one immediate exception is a "performance" for an out-group folklorist who is eliciting data, usually from a singular performer--an obviously very special, limited case. A far more important divergence from this in-group definition of folklore is that elucidated by Richard Bauman (1972). In some cases, he argues persuasively, folklore may be performed across group boundaries, and, indeed, differential identity may be the necessary pre-condition for performance. In stressing this point, Bauman is bringing a needed corrective influence to the generally dominant definition of folklore as in-group behavior. Nevertheless, in-group performance does appear to be much more definitive of folklore than those instances when it is shared with out-groups.

Ben-Amos would take us a step further by specifying the sociological definition of the in-group context and by pointing to its limiting qualities. He would speak of folklore as being truly folklore when it occurs, not only during an in-group situation, but in those situations when a relative few of the in-group members are engaged in face to face interaction, or what Ben-Amos would call the small group. Those few members have a shared identity and folkloric performance is limited to such a small in-group (1972). "In other words," he tells us,

> ...for a folklore communication to exist as such, the participants in the small group situation have to belong to the same reference group, one composed of people of the same age or of the same professional, local, religious, or ethnic affliation...folklore is true to its own nature when it takes place within the group itself. In sum, folklore is artistic communication in small groups (1972: 13).

Small groups can affect folkloric form and function, and, indeed, can be the necessary pre-condition for the very emergence of folklore, but by this very characteristic, they can also take on a normative, limiting aspect. That is, a group norm may also emerge dictating that folkloric actions may authentically happen only in such small in-group contexts and such actions in other contexts may be culturally unauthorized and perhaps resented.

I am convinced that such a rule of restriction operates within the larger Texas-Mexican community in regard to the use of chicano. The term should only be used as a slur or as a nickname in certain specified small group context. To repeat the words of my previously cited informant:

> ...no es cosa de política y de andar haciendo speeches usando la palabra...yo nomás la uso cada cuando como la usé ahorita... (it's not a political thing and for going around making speeches with the word... I just use it once in a while like I used it just now.)

The way he "used it just now" refers, of course, to a small in-group, somewhat playful, conversation. Or as another informant in the same bar expressed it,

> Cuando se usa, pos, casi todo el tiempo, la gente esta vacilando. (When it is used, almost all the time people are [speech] playing.)

As a non-casual utterance with symbolic power, chicano is governed by restrictive vultural rules for performance. We would agree with Voegelin: "It is surely reasonable to say that non-casual utternaces are restricted to particular times...these particular utterances would seem inappropriate at other times and in other places" (1960: 61). And, he continues,

> When a non-casual utternace...--as a rollicking ditty--is sung in the wrong place or by the wrong person, persons-in-the-culture find it shocking or humorous, just as they do when some non-verbal behavior is actualized by the wrong person or in the wrong place...There is wide general agreement among persons-in-the-culture in judging appropriateness of non-casual utterances (1960: 61).

It is precisely because they carry rhetorical power that non-casual utterances such as chicano must be socially restricted. The restricted in-group nature of nicknames in particular and their use as boundary markers have been well documented for other societies (Pitt-Rivers 1960, Antoun 1968; Dorian 1970; Freeman 1970). And we can adduce evidence from greater Mexican tradition. What Foster (1964) has to say about nicknames in a Mexican peasant village may also apply to chicano. "Nicknames," he tells us,

> ...constitue a sensitive area of culture. Almost always when I raise the question friends smile guiltily, cover their mouths with their hands, and then, with a little urging, usually launch forth with the pleasure that comes from discussing forbidden subjects. Nicknames are called apodos or mal nombres 'bad names', potentially damaging, whose danger can be neutralized only in specific context (119) [emphasis mine]

In such specific contexts,

> Nicknames are manipulative, but rather than countering, they accentuate the relationship as it is perceived to be; more intimacy if intimate, enmity of contempt if distant (119).

In addition to context, the use of nicknames has a limiting sexual restriction:

> Nicknames, it may benoted, are largely limited to males...Perhaps, this fact is subconscious recognition of the danger inherent in the use of nicknames, of the potential enmities that may result from careless use of aggressive behavior that is seen as appropriate to the male rather than the female role (121).

As with other social groups (Antoun 1968) this sexual limitation does seem to be shared by the greater Mexican community in the U.S. to some degree. It would seem to apply particularly to chicano and might begin to explain why Mexican women demonstrate a decidedly greater aversion to the term. (Metzger 1974; Miller 1976; Limón 1978). If these particular findings are accurate, they might lend reflective and critical pause to the efforts of those who would construct a feminist politics for the community around the public symbol chicana.

It is my contention, then that the folk performance of chicano appears to be governed by certain cultural rules of restriction. We would say that ideally, an appropriate performance would occur most naturally in a small, largely male, Spanish language dominant, in-group with some ludic dimensions. This performance context stands in sharp contrast to the public, group-shared, English language, seriously discursive settings in which the ideological use of the term occurs. In part the documented rejection of the term by the larger Texas-Mexican community may be fundamentally a rejection of a performance context judged as inappropriate for this essentially folkloric term.

The Cultural Limits of Political Ideology

Generally, studies of the relationship of folklore and social movements tend to focus on major genres such as folksong and tale, and they also tend to emphasize the uses to which the folklore is put by the movement in question. That is, not much is said about minor genres or about the attitudes of the folk who are the source of these materials (Dorson 1966; Kamenetsky 1972; 1977; Oinas 1975). In the present study, I have addressed both of the latter concerns lending considerable emphasis to the disharmony created by an appropriation of folk materials. Also as with folklore study in general, analyses of folklore and social movements emphasize the folklore text and its thematic content, movements emphasize the folklore text and its thematic content, noting how sometimes these are distorted for political ends. Here, I have pointed out how a folklore "text"--a single instance of folk speech--may be perfectly preserved by a movement which at the same time distorts the performance context is a cultural limit to the conversion of folklore into a successful political ideology--at least for an ideology that would resonate among the Mexican masses beyond the student sector. However, the conversion was of considerable service to the latter.

When Texas-Mexican students came to the University of Texas at Austin in the 1960s, many experienced a sense of social dislocation stemming from two related sources. First, as individuals from predominantly working class origins in Mexican South Texas, they entered a middle and upper class, Anglo-dominated academic ambience. Second, as they entered this very different scene, they witnessed a leftist and ethnic nationalist criticism of Anglo-American authority many of them had secretly resented but had never thought to openly criticize. The arrival of the farmworkers in Austin concretely dramatized all of these concerns even while they visibly reminded the students of their socio-cultural origins.

All of these forces set the student movemnt in motion and initiated a search for a new ideology. In its search, the movement could have turned to its own native political tradition--to the visible Mexican social organizations working on behalf of the community, groups such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) or the American G.I. Forum. However, these were contemptuously rejected for their accomodationist attitude toward U.S. politics and culture. A new cultural politics was needed and this was quickly born and expressed in the rhetorical symbol appropriated from folk tradition--chicano.

"It is a loss or orientation," Clifford Geertz tells us, "that most directly gives rise to ideological activity, an inability, for lack of usable models, to comprehend the universe of civic rights and responsibilities in which one finds oneself located" (1973: 219). It is in such times, "when neither a society's most general cultural orientations nor its most down to earth 'pragmatic' ones suffice any longer to provide an adequate image of political processes that ideologies begin to become crucial as sources of sociopolitical meanings and attitudes" (219).

Such ideologies, however are rarely set forth in bloodless, discursive modes.

> ...it is in turn, the attempt of ideologies to render otherwise incomprehensive social situations meaningful, to so construe them as to make it possible to act purposefully within them, that accounts both for the ideologies' highly figurative nature and for the intensity with which, once accepted, they are held (220).

Ultimately, "the function of ideology is to make an autonomous politics possible by providing the authoritative concepts that render it meaningful, the suasive images by means of which it can be sensibly grasped" (218).

In the 1960s and in to the 'seventies', chicano was the organizing principle for a number of ways of talking, acting, and performing. It became a suasive image and authoritative iedological concept which did enjoy some large measure of success. It generated solidarity and a new vision of political autonomy on behalf of the Mexican people, but it did both of these thing largely for student and student related activists. Its persuasive impact beyond the university student community has been limited to the youthful sectors of the population and even here the results are quite mixed and not overwhelming. Ironically the other major receptive audience for the term has been the Anglo-American world--its government, educational circles, and mass media. All of them freely make use of this important bit of folk culture transmitted to them by an insistent, and, perhaps, at times insensitive student movement. But the final irony is that which I have elaborated in this paper. As an ideological symbol, chicano does not appear to have exerted muchsuasive power over the larger community, for as Geertz has also noted, such cultural ideologies as formulated by nationalist intellectuals sometimes misfire and fail to take hold amongst those whose unity and support is sought. In his essay, he discusses one such failure in Indonesia, and in the present study, I have analyzed the causes of another within an ethnic group in the United States.

If I am correct in this anaylsis, then perhaps the time has come for critically assessing the Chicano movement's appropriation of this folk name and, by implication, its free use of other folk names--raza, barrio--and other folkloric behaviors such as food, music and festival. One ought to consider that the folk may not always be happy with what youthful, student, political people do with their expressive culture, and those who would use folklore and other aspects of culture should be attentive to, not only textual accuracy, but to such things as context, performance rules, and folk attitudes toweard their own folklore.

Indeed, and ironically enough, it is quite possible that because of the Chicano movement's public appropriation of the term, the larger community may use chicano less and less in the expressive interactions of everyday group life. In my own observations I already detect such a reluctance and a yet unfocused tendency to generate expressive alternatives such as chicas-patas (those with small feet) with the same folkloric definition and intent as chicano--a process reminiscent of Halliday's anti-languages,

> used for contest and display, with consequent foregrounding of interpersonal elements of all kinds. At the same time, the speakers of an anti-language are constantly striving to maintain a counter-reality that is under pressure from the established world. This is why the language is constatnly renewing itself--to sustain the vitality that it needs if it is to function at all (1976: 582).

If this new usage takes hold, it would be an interesting double inversion, for as Americo Paredes tells us, chicas-patas originally and ironically referred to the allegedly big footed (patón) Anglo-American (Paredes 1961). Over time chicas-patas has been redefined as another nickname for mexicanos in jocular interactions (Paredes 1978: 84-85). It is possible that with the institutionalization of chicano, the larger community may be intensifying chicas-patas as an alternative, affectionate, folkloric way to refer to themselves. In the sometimes tense relationship between political elites and the larger community, the latter may yet have the last folkloric word.

Culture, New Politics, and Old Names

It has become both an anthropological and popular commonplace of our time to say that cultures are not static and that they change. Yes, of course. Yet, on the other hand, something of them is stable, constant, and persistent even while there is change. The question of maintenance and change in ethnic cultures embedded in complex societies is of importance to all but perhaps personally more so to the politically engaged intelligentsia from these ethnic societies. There are more than enough forces inducing, indeed forcing, culture change in the world today and the participation of the ethnic intelligentsia in these processes should be an object of particular moral scrutiny. To the extent that the latter has anything to say, should a culture change? What should change? Is change of political or moral importance? These are thorny matters and at least one hopes for deliberate and critical reflection. Writing about his personal passage from his native ethnic society through a university Ph.D., Richard Rodriguez concludes:

> But perhaps now the time has come when questions about the cultural costs of education ought to be delayed no longer. Those of us who have been scholarship boys know in our bones that our education has exacted a large price in exchange for the large benefits it has conferred upon us. And what is sadder to consider, after we have paid that price, we go home and casually change the cultures that nourished us. My parents today understand how they are 'Chicanos' in a large and impersonal sense. The gains from such knowledge are clear. But so, too, are the reasons for regret (1974-75: 28)

While Rodriguez's parents may "understand" themselves to be chicano in some large and impersonal sense, I am not persuaded that they, their generation, and others of Mexican descent beyond the universities accept the term in the way that it has been put to them contextually by those within academe or that their "gains" are so clear. His parents and others--the mexicano janitors who smile in quiet wonder, pride, and amusement at the chicano students in the halls at the University of Texas--these ordinary individuals have their own view of culture and their own uses for chicano. To build a politics mindful of and in sensitive and critical dialogue with that society and culture is the task for those who would labor actively on behalf of the community.

Some members of the native intelligentsia have made a decision on this question of names and have opted for following the community's apparent preference. Within older leadership elements of the student movement, we are witnessing an acknowledgement of and a return to the term mexicano or Mexican as a name for public discourse even while reserving chicano for in-group use (Gomez-Q. 1978). From an anthropological point of view one can only note tha such a selection would be consonant with wider community practice. In Texas, as well as in other areas such as Los Angeles and Colorado, men and women of Mexican descent call themselves mexicanos, Mexican-Americans or Mexicans in order of preference. A politics constructed around a common public name migh enjoy greater success with those members of the community who are now citizer of the United States. It would also have additional importance when viewed against the background of current and massive immigration from Mexico--worker who also call themselves mexicanos and mexicanas. A thoughtful former chicar student leader and now an activist intellectual and Raza Unida Party worker in Texas has noted the dual thrust of this new cultural politics and I conclude with this quote. "The term Chicano," Tatcho Mindiola tells us,

> ... has proven to be exclusive rather than inclusive since by definitio it excludes mexicanos who were born in Mexico. Thus it is argued that chicano is a word which works against solidarity among all Mexicans. The use of the word Mexican or mexicano has only recently begun but a debate is sure to follow it its usage continues to gain acceptance... Why continue to emphasize differences if solidarity with all Mexicans i one of the goals? It seems that we have indeed gone the full circle. Going through Latin American, Spanish American, Mexican American, and chicano phase we wind up where we started--mexicanos. Proclaim it (1977).

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THE FOLK PERFORMANCE OF CHICANO AND
THE CULTURAL LIMITS OF POLITICAL IDEOLOGY*

Relevance Statement

This study should be of considerable interest to educators who work with Mexican descent populations. Relying upon survey and ethnographic data, the author raises a critical question concerning the use of the term chicano as a public name for this population. Those who have a need for referring to this group in public, institutionalized discourse should consider the author's argument for the private, in-group, folkloric nature of the term and the evidence for other, more culturally appropriate names for public discourse.